

Blogging about London: comparing the Italian and Anglo-American tourist gaze¹

CINZIA ORLANDO

Università del Salento

ABSTRACT

The present study aims at identifying the Italian and Anglo-American tourist gaze upon London, i.e. to show how London – one of the world’s most visited destinations – is perceived and described through language by Italian and Anglo-American tourists. To this purpose, a corpus of Italian and English travel blogs was created and used. The creation of a word frequency list of both corpora allowed us to identify four semantic categories of words – landmark sights/attractions; natural environment; food & drinks; and means of transport – corresponding to the different “faces” of London seen by the tourists. For each category, the most frequent and functional words (or groups of words) were considered and analysed to see how they are represented by the tourists of both cultures. The Italian and Anglo-American tourist gaze upon London were then compared and contrasted. The findings suggest that the differences between the two gazes find reason in different cultural backgrounds.

1 This paper is extracted from the author’s postgraduate dissertation titled “Blogging about London: comparing the Italian and Anglo-American Tourist Gaze” (academic year 2008/2009, supervisor: Prof. D.M. Katan, co-supervisor: Prof. F. Bianchi), which was discussed in Lecce at the University of Salento on 13 July 2009.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of *Tourist Gaze* was first introduced by the sociologist John Urry (2002), who defines the *gaze* as the most important tourist activity and the organizing sense within the tourist experience. In other words, the *gazing* process is what constitutes tourism. Indeed, when tourists “are away”, they go site seeing, or better sightseeing, they gaze upon landscapes or townscape, and look at the surrounding environment with interest and curiosity. Hence, the first contact tourists have with foreign places and foreign people, i.e. the “Other”, is visual: people and places are captured and consumed *visually* by tourists.

Urry also explains the way the tourist gaze operates and identifies its main characteristics.

First of all, the tourist gaze is constructed through difference (Urry 2002: 1). Places to be gazed upon are chosen by tourists for their distinctiveness, for their being different from and in contrast with the mundane and the everyday. While on holiday, people look for novelty and for “the exotic”. For an object/place to be gazed upon, it must be *out-of-the-ordinary*, involve different senses and be on a different scale from objects/places typically encountered in daily life.

Furthermore, the tourist gaze focuses on *unique objects*, which are “famous for being famous” (Urry 2001: 12); and on *signs*, i.e. clues telling the tourist that what s/he is looking at is “typical”, “exemplary”, “traditional” and thus extraordinary and worth seeing.

Another aspect of the tourist gaze is the lack of autonomy and criticism. Indeed, the gaze is determined, influenced, shaped and structured by a variety of tourist and non-tourist practices, such as films, TV, literature, magazines, guidebooks and postcards. Such discourses determine how and if an object has to be gazed at, what is the meaning associated with it, and whether it is unique, out-of-the-ordinary and thus worth viewing. In other words, such discourses lead people to be in certain places, gaze only at certain “marked” – must-see – sights in a certain way and at a certain time.

The elements identified by Urry will be taken into account in the present study whose aim is to identify, analyse and compare the Italian and Anglo-American tourist gaze upon London by making use of two corpora of travel blogs. Specifically, the basic assumption underlying the study – and which will be confirmed by the analysis – is that the way the two groups of tourists see and perceive the tourist destination – London, in this case – is strictly linked to and dependent on the culture they belong, and the cultural values they adhere to.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 THE CORPUS

Two corpora were collected for the purposes of this study: an Italian and an English corpus both containing texts of travel blogs, i.e. stories written in an online environment, where tourists recount their travel experiences, comment on the things seen on holiday, and express their feelings. In particular, being the aim of this research to analyse the Italian and Anglo-American tourist experiences in, perceptions of, and gazes upon “London”, the only blog entries considered to collect the corpora were those containing reports of tourism focusing on London.

The search for blogs entries was conducted on Google using combinations of the following keywords: “travel”, “trip”, “blog”, “travel stories”, “holiday” “travelogues” for the English corpus; “racconti”, “viaggio”, “blog” for the Italian corpus. The results were websites containing thousands of stories about journeys to a wide range of destinations; they were thus selected to include only travel reports on London. The process of selection was facilitated by the possibility of categorising blog entries by destination. For example, once selected the continent – “Europe/Europa” –, the second step was to select the country – “United Kingdom/ Regno Unito, or Great Britain/ Gran Bretagna” – and then the city – “London/Londra”. Sometimes it was possible to skip the second step and directly select the city of interest; in some – although rare – cases, it was necessary to specify the exact area – England/Inghilterra – and then the city. When there was no possibility of browsing by city, each blog entry was read and only those talking about London were chosen.

For the English blogs, a further process of selection was needed. Being English a vehicular language or lingua franca, it is used in oral and written communication by millions of people other than native speakers. For this reason, it was necessary to look at the personal profile of each blogger to see if s/he could be considered a “pure” – British or American – speaker of English or not. Blogs written in English by non-native speakers were excluded. Also omitted were the entries written by Londoners who, for obvious reasons, cannot be considered tourists.

The final results were as follow:

- 109 blog entries/texts (75,466 words) for the English corpus. In particular, 51 texts were taken from realtravel.com; 11 from roughguides.com; 19 texts from doyoo.co.uk; 8 from globosapiens.net; 15 from igougo.com; 3 from ciao.co.uk; and 2 from travelpod.com. 27 of the texts (19,807 words) are written by British people and the remaining 82 texts (55,659 words) are written by American people.
- 109 blog entries/texts (172,747 words) for the Italian corpus. In particular, 77 texts come from turistipercaso.it; 11 from cisonostato.it; 8 from markos.it; 4 from viaggiareliberi.it; 4 from diariodiviaggio.voloscontato.it; 3 from cadillac-trip.it; and 2 from comune.torino.it.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

The starting point of the analysis was the creation of a word frequency list of both the Italian and the English corpus by making use of TextStat, a free concordance software. The two lists of words were then selected according to two criteria: *relevance* for the purpose of the analysis, which is to identify and define the way Italian and Anglo-American tourists perceive London; and *frequency*, i.e. number of occurrences.

In particular, the selection process focused on four semantic categories of words, i.e. *London landmark sights/attractions*, *natural environment*, *food & drinks*, and *means of transport*.

Table 1 and 2 provide the list of *sights* found in the Italian and English corpus respectively, sorted according to their frequency in their own corpus. Considering that the two corpora have a different number of words and thus are quantitatively different, the number of occurrences for each sight was “normalised”, i.e. brought to a common scale – 100,000 – to make the data more comparable.

Piccadilly Circus 89.14	National Gallery 38.78
Big Ben 70.62	Notting Hill 38.71
Tower Bridge 62.51	Changing of the Guards 38.20
Trafalgar Square 62.51	Westminster Abbey 34.15
Harrods 57.30	Oxford Street 31.25
Covent Garden 56.73	Natural History Museum 23.73
Buckingham Palace 55.57	Madame Tussaud's 21.99
Camden 53.38	Greenwich 17.36
Portobello 53.83	Tate Modern 19.68
St Paul's 49.20	Science Museum 15.05
London Eye 47.46	Dungeon 5.78
Tower of London 47.46	The Globe 5.78
The (houses of) Parliament 46.31	
British Museum 41.67	

Table 1: Italian corpus

Tower of London 98.05	Oxford Street 27.82
Buckingham Palace 91.43	Changing of the Guards 25.17
London Eye 79.50	The Globe 18.55
Trafalgar Square 72.88	Harrods 18.55
Big Ben 70.23	Tate Modern 18.55
Westminster Abbey 56.97	Madame Tussaud's 18.55
Tower Bridge 50.35	The London Dungeon 15.90
The (houses of) Parliament 50.35	Greenwich 13.25
Piccadilly Circus 46.37	Science Museum 11.92
St. Paul's 38.42	Notting Hill 7.95
Covent Garden 35.77	Natural History Museum 6.62
Camden 33.12	Portobello 5.30
National Gallery 31.80	
British Museum 27.82	

Table 2: English corpus

The most frequent and relevant words belonging to the three remaining categories, i.e. *natural environment*, *food & drinks* and *means of transport*, are listed in Table 3 and 4. Just as for the sights, they were normalized to 100,000.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	FOOD & DRINKS	MEANS OF TRANSPORT
Park/s /Parco/parchi 217.38	Colazione/Breakfast 85.09	Metropolitana/metro/ tube/underground 266.28
	Té/tea/thé 39.94	Autobus/ bus 134.87
	Cibo 27.86	Taxi 30.10
	Caffè 26.04	
	Fish&chips 18.52	
	Cucina: 19.10	
	Ristorante/i/ino 100.72	

Table 3: Italian corpus

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	FOOD & DRINKS	MEANS OF TRANSPORT
Park/s 189.48	Food 83.48	Tube /subway/ underground 242.49
	Restaurant/s 78.18	Bus/es 180.21
	Breakfast 38.42	Taxi/s/cab/s 46.37
	Tea 33.12	
	Coffee 21.20	
	Fish&chips 18.55	
	Cuisine 5.30	

Table 4: English corpus

Once the data were collected, a contrastive analysis was conducted. In particular, concordance lines for the words chosen in each corpus were generated and their lexico-grammatical profile was investigated. The analysis aimed at defining the representation provided by Italian and Anglo-American tourists of *London landmark sights*, *natural environment*, *food & drinks*, and *means of transport*, which can be said to correspond to many of the different aspects or “faces” of London.

The following paragraph reports only the most important and significant results, i.e. those showing the main differences between the Italian and Anglo-American tourist gaze.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 LONDON LANDMARK SIGHTS

3.1.1 BIG BEN

Italian tourists see Big Ben as the symbol of London par excellence and thus, going to see it equals “really being in London”:²

2 The concordance lines quoted in the present paper have been taken from the two corpora without making changes of any sort. Typing, grammar or punctuation mistakes can thus be found.

il Big Ben, con giapponesi fotografi annessi e occhi sgranati non ci posso credere, io, da sola ... a Londra!

amare Londra è trovarsi ai piedi del Big Ben e scoprirsi per l'ennesima volta con la bocca spalancata per la sua magnificenza

Quando mi sono vista proprio sotto e ho guardato in alto quel mitico orologio, dentro di me gridavo piano... "sono a Londra... ci sono... eccomi qui... sono io!"

Concordance lines of "Big Ben" in the Italian corpus demonstrate that this sight fascinates the Italian tourists for its size, for the lighting and the view it offers to their eyes. Here below are some examples:

La sensazione nel momento in cui si esce dalla stazione metro è fenomenale: il Big Ben spunta all'improvviso altissimo e gloriosamente illuminato!

Uscire dalla stazione di Westminster e trovarsi di fronte il Big Ben illuminato come nelle migliori cartoline o illustrazioni viste in chissà quale guida

[...] e arriviamo giù giù fino al Big Ben. quando lo vediamo nn crediamo ai nostri occhi. Stavamo solo passeggiando e c'è lo ritroviamo lì. davanti a noi. tutto illuminato.

The Italian stereotypical image of Big Ben also includes the "chimes", which most of the tourists want and hope to hear:

Ed eccoci sotto al famoso Big Ben in attesa [...] dei rintocchi dell'orologio

Aspettiamo di sentire gli ultimo rintocchi del Big Ben e poi andiamo via [...]

If we analyse the language used in the lines quoted so far, we can notice how it conveys emotion. In particular, expressions like *occhi sgranati*, *non ci posso credere*, *bocca spalancata*, *non crediamo ai nostri occhi*, or adverbs and adjectives like *gloriosamente*, *fenomenale*, *mitico* all express wonder and appreciation towards the object (Big Ben) of the gaze.

By looking at "Big Ben" in the English corpus, instead, we can notice that no particular feelings are associated with it. Most of the concordances suggest that Big Ben is nothing more than one of the *major sights*, something to *walk to*, *see*, *look* as part of *the normal tourists things* to do. However, what is often specified in this corpus is that the name "Big Ben" does not refer to the clock but to the bell, as in the following examples:

Also saw Big Ben (which is actually the nickname of the bell inside the tower and not the clock tower itself)

Note: Big Ben isn't the clock, it's the bell!

The name Big Ben is given to the large bell inside the clock tower.

It seems that the Italians give importance to senses (hearing and visual) and emotions, while the English tend to place more emphasis on knowledge and to make things more explicit (Big Ben is the bell, not the clock).

3.1.1 WESMINSTER ABBEY

The Abbey is identified by Italian tourists by making reference to queens, kings, and royal events, as the following concordance lines show:

Meta successiva è la bellissima Abbazia di Westminster. [...] È il luogo dove è stata incoronata la regina Elisabetta e dove si sono svolti i funerali di Diana.

è la sede delle cerimonie più importanti dei regnanti, ovvero incoronazioni e funerali di coloro che fanno parte della corona inglese. Gli eventi più attuali sono i funerali di Lady D e della madre della regina Elisabetta II.

Instead, Westminster Abbey is associated in the English corpus with “tombs”:

So I headed for Westminster Abbey [...] how much stuff is crammed in all over the place!

It is a medieval site with hundreds of tombs of past Englanders, many who were famous

The two tourist gazes seem to be substantially different.

The Anglo-Americans see only what their eyes show them and thus, what is physically present within the visual space, i.e. tombs of people who made the history of England.

The Italians, on the other hand, seem to see events, images, and people – especially Queen Elisabeth and Lady Diana – that they have probably seen in films or on television and that have emotionally involved them, as confirmed by the following example:

Io ce l'avevo già un po' negli occhi e nel desiderio quando la vedevo nei film... quelle cerimonie di incoronazione... i cori splendidi dei cantori e delle voci bianche [...] mi ha sempre appassionato.

In other words, the Italians do not seem to look for things to see but for “emotions”, “sensations”, and “feelings” to live.

While the contact Anglo-American tourists have with the Abbey seems to be “factual”, that of Italian tourists appears to be more “emotional”.

3.2 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

As far as *natural environment* is concerned, the words *park/s* in the English and “parco/hi/park” in the Italian corpus were considered the most representative of the category and thus were investigated in their lexico-grammatical context.

Two different gazes can be identified here as well. Starting from the Italian corpus, concordance lines of this kind can be found:

Hyde Park: è un grandiosooooo Parcooooo! Ogni suo angolo è curatissimo, pulitissimo, e se ci fosse un superlativo per “perfetto”, lo userei.

Reagent's Park, un esplosione di colori e profumi, centinaia di tulipani variopinti caratterizzano questo parco curatissimo

il Greenwich Park [...] in questo parco dai colori unici si respira una pace e una tranquillità incredibile

i parchi devo dire sono una delle cose che mi ha colpito di più... pulitissimi [...] enormi con aiuole tempestate di tulipani colorati disposti ad arcobaleno, davvero scioccante!

Hyde Park, l'ho “vissuto” davvero come un miracolo. Ho assaporato questa beatitudine di poter guardare anch'io verso l'infinito dove ogni tonalità di verde tocca una corda diversa del cuore. Ho respirato... mi sono sdraiata fra gli alberi per aderire alla terra, carezzare l'erba fresca, guardare le nuvole e ringraziare Dio di questa abbondanza di meraviglie.

Different linguistic devices are used to represent and describe the size, beauty, tranquillity and cleanliness of London parks. These can be grouped into the following categories: adjectives, especially superlative forms like *grandiosoooo*, *pulitissimo*, *curatissimo*, [*more than*] *perfetto*, *enormi*; abstract nouns like *profumi*, *colori*, *pace*, *tranquillità*, *arcobaleno*, *miracolo*, *infinito*, *cuore*, *meraviglie*; metaphoric expressions like *esplosione di colori e profumi*, *si respira pace e tranquillità*, *ho assaporato questa beatitudine*, *guardare [...] verso l'infinito*, *tocca una corda diversa del cuore*. As can be noticed, when entering a park not only sight but also other senses, especially taste, smell and hearing are activated. In particular, all the devices identified also convey emotions and feelings, and contribute to create a dream atmosphere around parks.

The Anglo-Americans too perceive London parks in a positive way, as the use of adjectives like *great*, *magnificent*, *lovely* in the following examples suggest:

There are some great parks to see a bit of greenery [...]

The parks are magnificent.

Kensington Gardens is a lovely park [...]

However, differently from the Italians, they seem to go to parks not to “contemplate” the environment but to “do” things, like *have a nice walk*, *have a wander*, *enjoy a hot dog*:

taking a few photos we went for a nice walk in Hyde Park

we decided to have a wander in Hyde Park first

I first grabbed a quick dinner from a street vendor near Hyde Park, and enjoyed a hot dog in the park

The difference identified in the two corpora seems to suggest that Italian tourists tend to focus on “Be”, on emotions and feelings, while English tourists focus also on “Do”, on actions and activities (Katan 1998).

3.3 FOOD & DRINKS

The aspects of London food identified by both Italian and Anglo-American tourists are “expensiveness” and “cultural diversity”. Expensiveness is conveyed by the following examples:

i prezzi dei ristoranti sono un pochetto cari (le carni dalle 10 sterline in su, il pesce dalle 22 sterline [...])

Food would be the next thing that gets you tingling in London

“Cultural diversity” is suggested by the collocates *messicana*, *orientale* or *Indian*, in the lines below:

specialità culinarie: cucina orientale, o cucina messicana

Zaika: delicious Indian restaurant

If “international food” seems to be appreciated by both groups of tourists, the same does not happen for “English food”, which is seen negatively by the Italians:

La cucina inglese non fa per noi italiani!!

Nota dolente è il cibo inglese: è terribile il loro modo di mangiare.. ma si sa: mai come nella nostra Italia si mangia così bene!

As can be noticed from the examples above, for the “English” cuisine, the point of reference for comparison is the Italian counterpart, which is placed on a higher level. In other words, “a mine-is-better-than-yours” ideology is adopted.

Obviously, nothing is said by British tourists about their own cuisine; neither do the Americans seem to see “English cuisine” in a negative way.

What is more, despite the negative evaluation of English food, Italian tourists seem to opt for “English Breakfast”, “tea” and “Fish and Chips” during their stay in London. This apparent contradiction may be explained by looking at concordance lines of the three words:

Dopo una tipica colazione inglese, arriviamo [...]

fare gli inglesi fino in fondo ordinando un tè [...]

ormai da veri Inglese abbiamo sentito l'esigenza del tè

ordiniamo il più classico piatto inglese, Fish and Chips

The collocates *tipica*, *fare gli inglesi*, *da veri inglesi*, *classico* seem to suggest that these foods are eaten only because they are stereotypically seen as “typically”

English. In other words, eating Fish & Chips or the English breakfast, and drinking tea is a way of living the emotions of being English.

No significant collocates describing the three dishes as “typical or traditional” can be found in the English corpus. Indeed, the British are used to their breakfast and tea, and the touristy “fish and chips” are not so popular in Britain today as they were years ago. As far as the Americans are concerned, one possible reason is that the kind of food they can find in London is not so different from the USA, or that, for them, food is simply food and nothing else.

3.4 MEANS OF TRANSPORT

“Red double-decker buses” and “black taxis” are for both Italian and Anglo-American tourists the “essence” of London traffic. However different associations can be noticed. In the Italian corpus, we find concordance lines of this kind:

... la tipica atmosfera londinese contraddistinta dai taxi neri e dagli autobus rossi a due piani, vi cattureranno completamente.

I leggendari bus rossi e i classici taxi neri: sembra di essere in un film e invece siamo proprio a Londra!

Il tipico bus a due piani [...] le mie figlie sono impazzite

Black taxis and red double-decker buses seem to be more important for what they iconically represent – they are *legendari*, *classici*, *tipico* – than for what they are: means of transport. Moreover, their view seems to create emotional involvement: *vi cattureranno completamente, sembra [...] un film, impatto... stupendo*.

Such involvement does not seem to be found in the English corpus where red double-decker buses are simply seen as one of the possible ways of making a city tour, as in the following examples:

We loaded up on caffeine and got the impulse to tour around London on a double decker bus

Our best resource was paying for a double-decker bus ticket to hop on and off as much as you please at the famous attractions.

At this point, it could be argued that while for the Anglo-Americans buses and taxis are seen as means of transport which, as such, can be used, for the Italians they are not only this. They are elevated to “symbols”, “icons” that make London famous, they are *tipici*, *classici*, *legendari*. Furthermore, see buses and taxis or use them is for Italian tourists a source of emotion.

4.1 CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted so far has been an attempt to identify and define the Anglo-American and Italian tourist gaze upon the many “faces” of London by making use of two corpora of travel blogs and by taking language as a point of reference.

Some differences between the two gazes emerge from the analysis.

As far as the “landmark sights” are concerned, Big Ben is for the Anglo-Americans “the bell not the clock” while for the Italians it is a “feast for the senses”; Westminster abbey is a graveyard for the Anglo-Americans, but a set of emotional events for the Italians.

Differences can also be noticed for the other three categories, where parks are “used” rather than “contemplated” by the Anglo-Americans; where eating English food is part of the “emotional adventure” of “being English” for the Italians; and where red buses and black taxis are means of transport for the Anglo-Americans but also – and above all – “legendary” symbols of London for the Italians.

This would appear to suggest that the Italian gaze is attracted by and focuses on emotions, feelings and atmosphere; in other words, “sensing”. On the other hand, the Anglo-American approach to and gaze upon London seem to be more “factual”, “functional” and based more on “doing” than “sensing”.

The kind of differences highlighted so far seem to find a reason in different cultural orientations and to support the differentiation suggested by Edward T. Hall ([1976]1989) between Low Context Cultures (Anglo-American) – whose focus is, among others, on facts, functionality and doing, and High Context Cultures (Italian) – which give importance, among others, to relationships/feelings, senses and being (see also Katan 1998).

At this point, it is important to state that the present study is by no means exhaustive and further research, possibly involving a direct interview with the tourists in question, would be needed to investigate why Anglo-American and Italian tourists “see what they see” and to further confirm the cultural differences identified so far.

REFERENCES

- Hall E.- T. ([1976]1989) *Beyond Culture*, New York, Doubleday.
- Katan D. (1998) “Contexting culture: culture-bound interpretation of events in and between the Anglo-American and Italian press”, in *British/American Variation in Language, Theory and Methodology*. Ed. by C.T. Torsello, L. Haarman & L. Gavioli, Bologna, CLUEB, pp. 141-155
- Urry J. (2002) *The Tourist Gaze*. Second Edition, London, SAGE Publications.